Dr. Ervin’s Fairbury Stories

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Dr. Don Ervin and his family came to Fairbury in 1960. He practiced medicine in Fairbury from 1960 until the family moved to Colorado in 1970. During those ten years, he delivered hundreds of babies, performed many surgeries, and treated countless illnesses and injuries for families throughout Fairbury and the surrounding rural area. In 2012, when he was 82, Dr. Ervin published his autobiography, ***A Country Doctor: Small Town Medical Practice in the Nineteen Sixties.*** His book contains many interesting and sometimes humorous stories about life in Fairbury during the 1960s. The following are a few examples of those stories taken directly from his book.

One of the more memorable cases occurred during the annual Fairbury Fair. Dr. Ervin was on call in the emergency room when a carnival worker and her boyfriend brought in the woman's elderly mother, who had suffered burns on her arms and legs. Dr. Ervin learned that the elderly woman had been living in the back seat of the boyfriend's old Buick for several weeks. Because of her poor living conditions, she was extremely dirty and had a very strong odor.

Agnes Runyon, an experienced nurse who had worked many years at the Fairbury Hospital, was assisting Dr. Ervin that night. Even Agnes, who had seen many difficult cases, became sick to her stomach during the examination and had to step aside for a moment. The medical staff cleaned and dressed the woman’s burns and admitted her to the hospital. When Dr. Ervin saw the woman the next morning, after the nurses had bathed her and put her in a clean hospital gown, she looked like a completely different person. He discharged her a day or so later, and she probably returned to the carnival.

Another story involved patients who exaggerated the severity of their symptoms. Dr. Ervin sometimes prescribed a medication he called “PACGC.” The medicine was actually a common pain reliever, but he placed it in green capsules instead of the usual white tablets. He warned patients to use the capsules sparingly because they were very strong. Many patients reported that the medicine worked extremely well and soon felt much better. In reality, the medication was no stronger than ordinary aspirin. Dr. Ervin later admitted that the treatment was partly psychological, but it often helped reassure patients who were worried about minor ailments.

Dr. Ervin also became known in the community for his ability to make warts disappear. He would rub the wart with his thumb and confidently tell the patient it would soon go away. If the wart did not disappear after the first attempt, he sometimes placed the patient on the X-ray table and set the timer for five seconds. The timer clicked as it counted down, but the X-ray machine was never turned on. The sound alone convinced many patients that they had received a powerful treatment.

In many cases, the wart eventually disappeared on its own. Dr. Ervin never charged for this service and openly admitted that the treatment was more “hocus pocus” than medicine.

Dr. Ervin was famous in Fairbury for his successful treatment of warts. This scene was created using AI (Artificial Intelligence) and shows the X-ray machine and the timer he used to treat stubborn cases of warts.

One of Dr. Ervin’s early patients in Fairbury was Illinois State Policeman Charles G. McCarthy (1933-2019). He first met Charlie when he was called to his home because the trooper was suffering from severe abdominal pain. Dr. Ervin determined that the symptoms were typical of gallbladder disease and arranged for testing that confirmed the presence of gallstones. Before surgery could be scheduled, Charlie developed jaundice, indicating that a stone had blocked his bile duct and made the operation urgent. Although the procedure was only the second gallbladder operation Dr. Ervin had ever performed, the surgery was successful, and Charlie made an uneventful recovery. In the years that followed, the two men became close friends and remained so for decades.

Winter weather in central Illinois often created difficult working conditions for country doctors. During one severe snowstorm, Dr. Ervin received a late-night call from a farmer

who reported that one of his children was not breathing. Despite deep snow and dangerous road conditions, Dr. Ervin set out in his car to reach the farm. He soon became stuck in a snowdrift about half a mile from the house. Carrying his medical bag, he left the car and walked the rest of the way through the snow. When he finally arrived at the farmhouse, he found the parents and neighbors calmly drinking coffee in the kitchen. The child was breathing normally, and the emergency had passed. Although the situation turned out to be less serious than expected, the long trip underscored the dedication required of doctors serving rural communities during that era.

Another tragic incident occurred when Dr. Ervin was asked to check on an elderly woman who lived alone. Her daughter had become concerned after repeated telephone calls went unanswered. Dr. Ervin went to the woman's house and entered when no one responded to his knock. Inside the living room, he found the woman trapped in a broken glass-topped end table. She had apparently sat on the table, causing the glass to shatter, and had fallen into it, becoming stuck. By the time Dr. Ervin discovered her, she had died. He later reflected that he could only imagine how frightening her final moments must have been.

Farm and industrial accidents were a regular part of medical practice in rural communities. One particularly serious case involved a worker at Honegger's feed mill located on the west side of Fairbury. The worker had gotten his hand and wrist caught in a corn grinder. Dr. Ervin was called to the plant, where he found that the machinery had severely crushed the man's hand. With the help of several workers, he used tools to dismantle part of the machine in order to free the injured man. The damage to the hand was so extensive that it could not be repaired.

After transporting the patient to the hospital, Dr. Ervin performed surgery to amputate the hand above the wrist. The man recovered from the operation and survived the accident, but the injury permanently changed his life. Dr. Ervin later noted that this was the only major amputation he performed during his years in Fairbury.

These stories provide a glimpse into the daily life of a small-town doctor during the 1960s. Medical technology was far less advanced than it is today, and doctors often relied on experience, judgment, and determination to care for their patients. They worked long hours, made house calls in all kinds of weather, and responded to emergencies at any hour of the day or night. In many cases, they were the only medical professionals available to help families during crises.

This article represents just a small sampling of the many Fairbury-related stories that are described in Dr. Ervin's book. A copy of his book can be reviewed at the Fairbury Echoes Museum. A PDF copy of his book can be viewed and/or downloaded from Archive.org using the Internet address of https://tinyurl.com/4warcnsj. Dr. Ervin's book provides a fascinating look at medical practice and everyday life in Fairbury during the 1960s and helps preserve an important chapter in our community's history.